



Outcome interdependence shapes the effects of prevention focus on team processes and performance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 September 2011

Accepted 20 February 2013

Available online 9 April 2013

Accepted by Richard Moreland

Keywords:

Regulatory Focus Theory

Teams

Group dynamics

Outcome interdependence

Incentives

Motivation

ABSTRACT

Although the effects of regulatory focus on individual-level performance have often been studied, relatively little is yet known about team-level effects. Filling this void, we integrate the notion that promotion-focused individuals are concerned with progress and achievement, whereas prevention-focused individuals are concerned with security and vigilance, with the insight that team processes and performance depend on outcome interdependence (individual versus team rewards). The hypothesis that prevention-focused teams react more strongly than promotion-focused teams to differences in outcome interdependence was tested among 50 teams performing an interactive command-and-control simulation. Regulatory focus and outcome interdependence were both manipulated. The results showed that prevention-focused teams working for team rather than individual rewards reported higher work engagement and less error intolerance, coordinated more effectively, and performed better. Promotion-focused teams were not influenced by outcome interdependence. We discuss the implications of our results for theory and effective team management.

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Introduction

Many organizations structure themselves around teams (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Because team tasks are usually complex and multifaceted, and can thus be framed in terms of either promotion or prevention goals (cf. Beersma et al., 2003), teams may emphasize the achievement of positive outcomes (promotion) or the prevention of negative outcomes (prevention) while working towards their goals. A manufacturing team, for instance, can focus on producing a large number of products (a promotion goal), or on preventing product defects, which lead to customer dissatisfaction (a prevention goal). Likewise, traffic control teams can focus on quickly clearing an area (a promotion goal), or on maintaining the safety of that area and making sure there will be no casualties (a prevention goal).

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) proposes that promotion-focused individuals adopt eager task strategies: They aim to maximize positive outcomes and concentrate on activities related to their wishes, ideals, and hopes (Förster & Werth, 2009; Higgins, 2000). Prevention-focused individuals, in contrast, tend to adopt vigilant task strategies: They aim to minimize negative

outcomes and concentrate on responsibilities, duties, and safety (Förster & Werth, 2009; Higgins, 2000). As a result, promotion-focused individuals tend to be more creative, more risk-tolerant, and less vigilant and accuracy-oriented than prevention-focused individuals (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011; Friedman & Förster, 2001, 2005; Förster, Higgins, & Taylor Bianco, 2003; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001).

Whether and how these individual-level effects translate to team-level processes and performance is largely unknown (Florack & Hartmann, 2007; Sassenberg & Wolfin, 2008). In line with work on group goals and group efficacy, we expect that teams will develop regulatory mechanisms that are influenced by individual, team-level, and contextual factors (e.g., DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, Milner, & Wiechmann, 2004; Gibson, 2001). The question then becomes how regulatory focus affects team functioning and performance, and how organizations can improve the performance of promotion- and prevention-focused teams? We address these questions by examining the effects of regulatory focus on the functioning and performance of dynamic decision-making teams. To develop hypotheses regarding those effects, we examined the literature on team functioning and performance, and distinguished two important aspects of team work that are relevant with regards to regulatory focus.

First, working in a team obviously means working with others instead of alone. Teamwork thus implies that individual actions

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affect the action tendencies of other group members; individual successes and failures influence not only the individual's subsequent performance, but also the performance of others. In team settings, individual successes and failures are thus subject to scrutiny by others, are evaluated, and applauded or criticized by others (e.g., De Dreu, Nijstad, & Van Knippenberg, 2008; Homan, Van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; Jackson & Williams, 1985; Kramer, 1991; McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000). Second, working in a team can provide people with input and support from team members (Beersma et al., 2003; Edmondson, 1999). In sum, working in teams may entail social evaluation as well as social support (Jackson & Williams, 1985).

We propose that the relative salience of these two aspects of the team context depends largely on the degree of outcome interdependence among team members (Beersma & De Dreu, 2005; Beersma et al., 2003; De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996; Stanne, Johnson, & Johnson, 1999; Tjosvold, 1998; Wageman, 1995). Team members' outcomes can be determined by their personal performance (individual reward structure) or by their joint performance (collaborative or team reward structure; e.g., Deutsch, 1949; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Tjosvold, 1998). Ample research has shown that whereas individual reward structures foster competition among team members, team rewards foster trust, cohesiveness, and mutually supportive behavior (Beersma et al., 2003; De Dreu, 2007; De Dreu et al., 2000; Deutsch, 1949; Homan et al., 2008; Miller & Hamblin, 1963; Rosenbaum et al., 1980; Stanne et al., 1999; Steinel, Utz, & Koning, 2010; Wageman, 1995).

In this paper, we argue that teams in a prevention focus are more sensitive to both aspects of the team context than are teams in a promotion focus. Therefore, prevention-focused teams should react more strongly to differences in reward structure, displaying more effective team processes and better team performance when they work under a team reward structure than when they work under an individual reward structure. We first provide a brief literature review on the effects of regulatory focus on individual and team functioning and performance. Then we discuss the two aspects of working in teams, and how they are made salient by different reward structures. Finally, we formulate specific hypotheses regarding the influence of outcome interdependence on teams with different regulatory foci and present an experiment that tested these hypotheses.

Regulatory focus: from individual-level functioning to team-level performance

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) explains the self-regulation of individuals towards desired end states. *Promotion-focused individuals* emphasize achieving positive outcomes and are concerned with accomplishments, hopes, and aspirations. In contrast, *prevention-focused individuals* emphasize avoiding negative outcomes and are oriented towards security, duties, and obligations. Different regulatory foci involve different motivational states. Whereas promotion-focused individuals are *eager* to obtain successes, prevention-focus individuals are *vigilant* to avoid failures (see e.g., Förster, Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Shah & Higgins, 1997). As a result, promotion-focused individuals use approach strategies and engage in risky behavior, whereas prevention-focused individuals use avoidance strategies and follow rules (Florack & Hartmann, 2007; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000).

Promotion and prevention goals can also be activated within a given team task, for instance by group mottos (e.g., Faddegon, Scheepers, & Ellemers, 2008). However, little is known about how regulatory focus influences processes and performance at the team-level (Sassenberg & Wolfin, 2008, see also Galinsky, Leonardelli, Okhuysen, & Mussweiler, 2005), especially because

most research on regulatory focus in groups has focused on minimal groups, rather than "real", interactive ones. Some early evidence comes from Levine et al. (2000), who examined groups in which members, although not engaging in actual interaction, at least saw each others' decisions. Their results showed that the decisions of group members converged over time, and that groups made riskier decisions when they were in a promotion rather than a prevention focus. An example of research on regulatory focus in more interactive teams is a study by Florack and Hartmann (2007), who examined decision-making groups. They found that collectively induced regulatory focus affected decision processes, such that prevention-focused groups were more risk averse than promotion-focused groups. More recently, Rietzschel (2011) and Dimotakis, Davison, and Hollenbeck (2012) have also reported evidence that regulatory focus can operate at the group level.

However, it remains unclear how groups with different regulatory foci are influenced by group-level factors, including group processes, group tasks, and, of particular importance here, reward structures. Previous research on interactive groups has focused mainly on risk-taking behaviors, showing that a prevention focus makes groups more risk averse, whereas a promotion focus increases risk-taking behaviors. Although this research points to the importance of studying regulatory focus at the team level, teams often perform complex tasks that cannot be reduced to simple risk-tolerance. Teamwork requires coordination, information processing and acquisition, social evaluation, and the provision of feedback, to name but a few processes related to high performance (De Dreu et al., 2008). We expect regulatory foci to matter for these aspects of teamwork as well, and thereby influence team functioning and performance. We elaborate upon this below, focusing on two broad classes of processes that are important for teamwork—social evaluation and social support.

Teamwork: social evaluation versus social support

Social evaluation is inherent in teams, whose members monitor and evaluate each other's performance continuously. Such monitoring and evaluation creates two basic, well-established tendencies – evaluation apprehension and social facilitation (Henchy & Glass, 1968; Zajonc, 1965). Evaluation apprehension (the fear of being evaluated negatively by others; Cottrell, 1972; Nijstad, 2009) has potentially detrimental effects on group coordination, knowledge sharing, and performance (e.g., Bordia, Irmer, & Abusah, 2006; Garcia, Weaver, Darley, & Spence, 2009; Nijstad, 2009).

At the same time, however, the presence of others also has been found to comfort people. Classic research on affiliation and the need to belong has shown that people often prefer being around others and feel safer in a group context rather than alone, especially in threatening situations and especially when potential affiliates are perceived to help rather than hurt (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Rofe, 1984; Schachter, 1959). For example, Jackson and Latané (1981) showed that performing on stage with others rather than alone reduced participants' tension and nervousness.

Whether team members experience social evaluation or social support depends on how outcome interdependence within the team is structured. According to Deutsch's (1949) theory of cooperation and competition, people's beliefs about how their outcomes are related determine how they interact, which in turn affects the cohesiveness and performance of their group (see also Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Two types of outcome interdependence are commonly distinguished (Deutsch, 1949; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Wageman, 1995; Wageman & Baker, 1999). In team reward structures, individual outcomes depend on joint performance. In individual reward structures, individual outcomes depend on personal performance. As noted at the outset, extant research into the consequences of individual versus team rewards indicate that

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